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YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

VOLUME XXXIII • NUMBER 3

MARCH 1954

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*Half Dome from Glacier Point, winter
—Ansel Adams*



Staging on the road to Yosemite Valley.

Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF
THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DIVISION AND
THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, INC.

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VOL. XXXIII

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NO. 3

DOES IT PAY TO VISIT YO SEMITE?

By Olive Logan

EDITOR'S NOTE: Probably the reader will be puzzled by the above title. We hasten to explain that it was written 84 years ago, when this story was originally published in the magazine *Galaxy* for October 1870. It is a narrative—often humorous, often bitter—telling of the excruciating experiences that a visit to Yosemite entailed in the days before any roads were built into the famed valley. The article is a remarkable account whose reprinting here serves to remind us of that early-day sentiment regarding a dread journey beset with perils and hardships. For 23 years after the discovery of Yosemite Valley in 1851, there was no way to enter it except by horsetrail, and the visitor had to start his trip into the mountains by a wild stagecoach ride over primitive roads. Today's traveler, blessed with modern roads and conveyances, can scarcely appreciate the rigors of a pioneer trip to Yosemite, though he may think he is encountering them while driving over the old Tioga Road. In following this story of long ago, whose length requires that we present it in three installments in *Yosemite Nature Notes*, we believe our readers may be inclined to feel sympathy for the author and her traveling companions, and to wonder if, in her time, it really did "pay to visit Yo Semite."

Part I

Lunatics had not yet reached such depth of imbecility as to ride of their own free will in California stages.—Bret Harte in "*The Luck of Roaring Camp*," etc., p. 121.

I can imagine with what a shout of derision my audacious question will be received by those valiant travellers who have never been to the celebrated Valley; but as I have just returned from my trip *de rigueur* to Yo Semite, and am now, thank fortune, comfortably quartered in a civilized hotel, I think it not unwise to tell a plain, unvarnished tale of what awaits the Yo Semite pilgrim; for of the dozens of persons who have written about Yo Semite, I have never known one who gave anything like an accurate description of the perils and tortures attendant upon the journey thither.

I have said the trip was *de rigueur*. No sooner do you announce to your friends in New York that you are going to California than they immediately cry out, "Ah, then you will see the Yo Semite!" It reminds one of the old story of the Irish peasant: "Is it going to the United States ye are? Then would ye mind taking a parcel to me brother in Rio Janeiro?"

I have known Californians who went to New York, and returned home without seeing the Adirondacks; but wo betide the wandering Easterner if he seek the Pacific without bringing a trip to Yo Semite back with him! All along the railroad westward he is badgered with inquiries as to the probable data

of his journey to Yo Semite; and when, after the long ride across the continent, he is received at last within the hospitable walls of one of San Francisco's grand hotels, the first thing he receives is the card of the agent for Yo Semite, who encloses a small map showing the three different modes of reaching the same. The newspapers in chronicling your arrival speak of your intention of visiting Yo Semite, and the first question asked by persons to whom you have brought letters of introduction is—as the reader will naturally suppose—"When do you leave for Yo Semite?"

It may cause you some surprise, perhaps, when you discover that they who live here have themselves never been to Yo Semite; but you naturally imagine that this is because they do not feel that great love for the beautiful which distinguishes your noble self; perhaps they have not the time, nor the money; in fact, you frame a thousand excuses for them, and it never once enters your head that it is because they don't care to go. Of the scores of people I met in San Francisco only two or three had been to Yo Semite. But then there must have been insuperable obstacles in the way of their going, or they certainly would all have rushed in a body. Thrice happier I! Thrice luckier I! Nothing stood in my way. Would something had!

I must confess it was rather appalling to discover that of the three roads leading to the Valley, even the shortest required two days of staging and one whole day on horseback—before reaching the Earthly Paradise. The Mariposa road is admitted to have fifty miles of horseback trail; the Coulterville twenty-five; that via Hardin's and Chinese Camp only eighteen. I chose the last.

I chose the last, being the shortest, because at Salt Lake City I had met Mrs. B., of Cambridge, Massachusetts. O Mrs. B. of Cambridge, Massachusetts! having told me so much, why did you not tell me more? "I cried bitter tears," said she with a shudder; "but then I am not at all used to horseback exercise; are you?" "I ride as well as the generality of American women," replied I, with an air. "Then perhaps you'll not suffer so terribly as I did. To me it was dreadful." "But does it pay you for the trouble—the Yo Semite?" "Yes," said she, falteringly, "I—I—*think*—it does!"

Now Mrs. B. of Cambridge, Massachusetts, if you had frankly told me what I am now sure you felt—and that is that you "thought" it "didn't" — you would have sincerely obliged the writer of this article, who, if the whole truth—or even part of it—had been told her, would have vigorously braved public opinion, the proud man's contumely, the finger of scorn, the astonishment of her mother, the disgust of her artist cousin, and stayed severely away from the Yo Semite Valley. You are an honorable lady, Mrs. B.; but the mistaken enthusiasm which led you to exaggerate the good and lessen the ill of this Yo Semite journey is the same with you as with many other persons who have gone there and written or talked about the spot.

I was informed by one of the few ladies who had been to the Valley, whom I met in San Francisco, that it was next to an impossibility to accomplish the journey without arraying myself in a Bloomer costume. Pardon me that I recoiled at this. I feel that my charms are not so numerous that I can afford to lessen them by the adoption of this most ungraceful and unbecoming of dresses; but when she assured me

that it was almost a necessary precaution against being thrown from the horse to ride astride, I saw at once that my time had come, and a Bloomer costume I must wear. The dressmaker to whom I applied had made others, and needed no instructions when I told her I was going to the Yo Semite. She carved me out a costume; but pardon me once more if I shrink from the task of describing it. It was simply hideous. "The larger the hat the better," said my friend; and I remembered a "flat" which I bought last year for Long Branch, but never used much because of the high winds getting under it and carrying it away. I drew it out of my trunk, and she pronounced it just the thing. It stuck out in front and poked out behind, and was tied down over the ears with a ribbon. Cotton gloves, which fitted as cotton gloves alone can fit, completed the outfit.

I found that travellers cannot take baggage to Yo Semite. The stages are full of passengers, and have small accommodation for superfluous freight; and when you leave the stage and take to horses, the transportation of baggage is next to impossible. Everything is carried into the Valley on pack-mules, and travellers are frankly told by the agent that a small hand-bag is all that can be taken. "What, no linen—no clean dress? Nothing in the world for two weeks in summer, but a comb and a tooth-brush?" Even so.

At my last breakfast at the Grand Hotel in San Francisco, prior to leaving by rail for Stockton and thence to Yo Semite, there entered the dining room and sat down opposite our party a very distinguished-looking Englishman, who, hearing us talking about Yo Semite, begged our pardons and wanted to know if we were going there. Super-

fluous question! Doesn't everybody go there? "A terrible trip," said this English gentleman, when I answered in the affirmative, "especially for ladies; and you may take my word for it, it's a trip that *don't pay*."

Now wasn't it absurd and offensive in that Englishman to talk in this disparaging manner about one of our country's grandest sights? Might as well say that Bunker Hill Monument didn't pay, or that Niagara was only fit to run a saw-mill. Like as not one of those mean Englishmen who go home and write books about this "blarsted country," after Squire Jones has done them the honor to ask them to dinner with him. Should we allow this prejudiced creature to influence our judgment, upset our well-laid plan, and cast a slur upon the national honor, represented in this instance by the Yo Semite Valley? No. Patriotism forbade it. Besides, our tickets were bought and paid for, and the agent wouldn't have taken them back at any price.

We arrived at Stockton in the evening, and strolled out for a walk. Stockton, you will observe, is the starting point for the Yo Semite. If you don't know that before you get there, you will soon discover it. The leading hotel is the Yo Semite House. Be very sure I stopped there. I was stricken with the Yo Semite fever. I was enthusiastic over the prospect of what was before me. I wanted to commune with Nature.

A short walk in the town revealed the fact that there was an Insane Asylum there. Can this have any connection with its being the returning point for Yo Semite tourists? There were also a large number of runners for the different stage lines. These persons asked questions with an easy familiarity which was delightful; and recommended different

routes with noise and persistency enough to disgust a New York hack-driver.

The stages all leaving at 6 o'clock, we were pounded awake at 4 and summoned to breakfast. What the flies left of the meal was very dirty and disgusting. Sick at the very outset, myself and the other idiots went outside. The air there was sweet and refreshing. While we waited, the rival stage drew up. It was already full of Chinese, Irish, Italians, and Mexicans, who were going—not to Yo Semite—but to different stations in the mountains—to mines, to fruit ranches, to vineyards, wine-shops, and other queer places up in the wonderful Sierras. They all seemed jolly; the Chinese with their pigtailed wrapped around their heads and their queer shoes dangling on their feet, tucked themselves away in incredibly small places; the Italians swearing *Per Bacco* and the Mexicans *Caramba*, their driver's whip-lash snaps like a pistol-shot; and so good-by to them.

Our own stage comes rattling up a minute later. It is soon full of tourists—not a business person among us. Oh, what fun we are going to have! Here is a young couple from Chicago; a pretty girl is the young wife, with dreamy eyes and raven hair eked out with a monstrous chignon that begins at her very brow and ends somewhere between her shoulder-blades. She will have trouble with that before she gets to Yo Semite; even the least experienced of us can see that; but nothing can be serious with us. We are all youngish persons, gay, healthful, and bound for the Yo Semite Valley.

Pretty soon the sun's rays begin to fall heavily. There is not a breath of air stirring. The road is level as yet, but the dust is dreadful. I had

heard of the dust of California roads, but this surpasses belief. It would be an impossibility for any road in an Eastern State to be so dusty, try as it might, for its soil is nowhere parched with a six months' drought. California ladies have told me that they have seen their husbands come home after stage rides so begrimed with dust that neither the wives of their bosoms nor the mothers who bore them could recognize the wanderers. I tried to talk to my companion in the stage; I was choked by the dust. Conversation was impossible. A fence six feet from the stage window was invisible behind the dust cloud. I put my head gasping out of the window to see the driver. He was gone; so were the horses. The crack of the whip was still heard, and some locomotive power was impelling us forward; but through the dust who should say what it was? The features of my companions grew indistinguishable through the layers upon layers which gathered upon their once ruddy faces; the jet-black waterfall of the Chicago bride miraculously turned white after the fashion of the prisoner of Chillon; and more than that—it began to wobble. But if the wobbling had been confined to waterfalls alone, never, oh never, should this plaint have been penned. The wobbling very soon became general, universal, annoying, painful, intolerable, maddening! We had left the few miles of level road which beguile the traveller on leaving Stockton, and were now ascending the foot-hills. And our troubles were but begun. At Chinese Camp some of our passengers got out to go by another route. We also got out, for here we changed stages. We left the decent coach which took us up at Stockton, and were now ensconced in a hard, lumbering, springless, un-

painted fiend (I am satisfied this wagon was a thing of feeling, and chuckled in every one of its rusty bolts and creaked in all its ugly joints at the pain it caused us), and were thumped along at the pace of lunatics over the stony ascent. Past deserted mining towns with their dried-up sluices and ruined huts; past Chinese and Chinese and yet again Chinese, and after that Chinese out of all whooping; Chinese gambling, and Chinese mining and irrigating and planting, and finally—oh, would it be believed in the Celestial Kingdom?—past Chinese on horseback.

And we picked up a jolly little Italian with his wife and babies. He was chatty and merry, and smelt of onions and wore gold rings in his ears. He had been in California ten years, he told us, and had been back to Italy twice. We dropped him at his ranch, a dirty place, but running wild with luscious grapes. His babies were lifted down by an Italian youth of olive skin and midnight eyes, who was clad in picturesque tatters, and greeted the new-comers with a musical holla! A neighbor of the same nationality devotes his time and acres to raising onions—and such onions! As large as a muskmelon, and with an

odor proportionate to their size. May they never make the trip eastward, by sea or overland.

We try our best to enjoy life. Along the road we stop at ranches and buy delicious fruit at moderate prices. The scenery is wild and grand; the air is pure and sweet; the fruit we buy is so ripe and juicy that it fairly melts in the mouth. Isn't this a delightful picture? This is what all tourists write about. Now the truth is, that the possession of these things—even no further than this on our journey—is scarcely noticed. After the Yo Semite trip is all over, and you try to find some excuse for yourself for having been such a ninny as to run sheep-like where the other sheep bells tinkled, then you remember that those ranches where the fruit was sold were luxuriant, the fruit was delicious, the view of the mountains grand. At present you are coated with dust, your eyes are smarting, your tongue is clogged, your hair is caked, your limbs are sore, your flesh is inflamed, you want to go home. And this is only the first day, over the best part of the road, and in the stage. What will it be when it comes to the "trail" and the "pack" and the "horseback" part of it?

(To be continued in April issue)

The Yosemite stage at Priest's Hotel on the Big Oak Flat Road.



BOMBS AWAY

By George Von der Lippe, Ranger Naturalist

It is without the usual air-raid warning that the small Sierra chickaree cuts loose a Jeffrey pine cone. After a whistling descent from a high branch of the tree, the cone hits the ground with a resounding thump. Fortunately the target of the chickaree's bombardment, so far as I know, has not been the human passer-by.



Sierra chickaree

Parratt

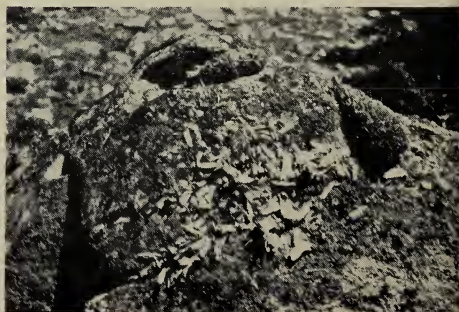
About the beginning of August this small squirrel may begin his preparations for winter by spending his entire day collecting various kinds of cones for the seeds they contain. Around Glacier Point the cone of the Jeffrey pine seems to be preferred as his source of supply. This cone measures between 5 and 10 inches in length, and in its unripened state weighs 2 pounds or more. The height from which they are dropped, together with their

weight, make them potential objects of damage. At Glacier Point they have occasionally fallen on parked cars, causing good-sized dents.

Not all the efforts of the chickaree to harvest his winter food supply prove to be fruitful. The Sierra ground squirrel has been observed sitting at the base of a Jeffrey pine waiting for the cones to fall. Then before the chickaree can get out of the tree to realize his prize the larger ground squirrel easily picks it up and escapes with it.

When the chickaree does recover his pine cone "bombs" he either hauls them off to storage or eats the seeds from them immediately. To get at the seeds, he handles the cone much as we would an ear of corn, and gnaws its scales off at their point of attachment.

As a result of the chickaree's dining, a small heap of cone scales is left on the forest floor, resembling a carpenter's pile of wood shavings. What remains of the axis of the pine cone is something that looks very much like a corn cob. These accumulations of litter are commonly known as "kitchen middens," and when they are found they are good evidence of the presence of the chickaree bombardier.



Chickaree's kitchen midden

A VISIT TO YOSEMITE'S MATTERHORN COUNTRY

By John R. Haller, Yosemite Field School, 1952

Lying along the northeastern boundary of Yosemite National Park is the Sawtooth Ridge, which culminates in the summit of Matterhorn Peak, 12,281 feet in elevation. In September 1951 a group of seven friends decided to explore some of the spectacular, seldom-visited country near the Sawtooth Ridge.

After three pleasant days of back-packing from the Virginia Lakes on the east side of the Sierra, we found ourselves at the summit of Burro Pass within the park, about 10,650 feet in elevation. From here we could look back down beautiful Matterhorn Canyon, up which we had come. Directly in front of us stood the magnificent Sawtooth Ridge, with its vertical walls, flutings, and spires. In this ridge the Sierran crest attains a ruggedness and impressiveness not to be found farther north. All the peaks and prominences of the ridge have apt and colorful names, many of them given by Sierra Club climbers. There is Blacksmith Peak, Cleaver Peak, the Sawblade, the Three Teeth, the Doodad, the Dragtooth, and finally the Matterhorn itself. Running along the base of the ridge was the little valley formed by the upper end of Slide Canyon—a very pretty valley with a number of small streams cascading down its sides to the meadowy floor. At our feet, just a few hundred feet below the pass and overlooking the valley, was a boulder-strewn, grassy bench, perhaps a quarter of a mile wide. On this bench were two small tarns which looked very cool and inviting after a hot day on the trail, so we scrambled down eagerly to investigate their swimming possibilities.

We found the water surprisingly warm for high Sierran lakelets. After a most refreshing swim we began to look around for a campsite. This was to be our exploration base. We didn't have to look far. A few yards downstream from the outlet of the lower lakelet stood a group of small, windswept mountain hemlocks and whitebark pines. The area around these trees made a perfect camping place. It was sheltered from the wind, cushioned with several inches of springy pine needles, provided with an abundant natural supply of firewood, and commanded a striking view of the Sawtooth Ridge.

The bench on which we were camped proved to be an exceedingly interesting spot. Being at an elevation of 10,300 feet, it was almost at timberline, and the trees were twisted and windblown into many picturesque shapes. The mountain hemlocks pleased us particularly. They took on some of the fascinating growth forms so typical of the dwarfed whitebark pine of the high country, but at the same time they retained all of their usual charm and elegance. The drooping branchlets and graceful cones of these miniature mountain hemlocks were a constant source of enjoyment to us as we traveled about our bench. One whitebark pine near our camp attracted our special interest. It had grown up from the base of a large boulder, and because of the warmth and protection from the elements that the rock provided, the tree had been trained along the side of the boulder and over the top, much like an espalier tree or vine.



Anderson

Matterhorn Canyon, with Burro Pass and Sawtooth Ridge in distance.

On the second day of our Sawtooth visit, some of us headed down Slide Canyon to see the tremendous rockslide which had given the gorge its name. For about its first two miles, Slide Canyon runs directly west, then turns abruptly to the southwest. Just beyond this turn, Slide Mountain towers nearly 2,000 feet above the canyon floor. In fairly recent times, possibly around a hundred years ago and before the first white man had explored there, a huge portion of the mountain broke off and crashed down into the canyon. To us the slide appeared almost as fresh as if it had occurred only a few days before. The face of the mountain showed a great naked scar, down which the slide had come. The canyon floor, which was about a quarter of a mile wide, had been filled with enormous boulders for about half a mile of its length. It was impossible for us to cross the slide, since many of the granite blocks were the size of small houses, and all of them were piled in com-

plete chaos. In order to get below the slide, it was necessary for us to climb several hundred feet up the opposite wall of the canyon and detour above the rocky confusion. The slide had also dammed the stream, so that a shallow lake or marsh had been formed. From all the evidence around us, it was not difficult to imagine what a stupendous thrill it would have been to witness the awesome spectacle of a whole mountainside breaking loose, and, with a violence seldom matched in Nature, thundering down into the canyon.

A few members of our group were experienced rock climbers. They had a superb time scaling some of the pinnacles of the Sawtooth Ridge, a climbers' paradise. From our camp we could sometimes see the tiny figures of our friends, almost a mile away, working along the face of the cliffs or outlined against the sky. The ascent of the Matterhorn Peak itself was not difficult. It was less work than Mount

Dana, for example, and involved just an interesting amount of boulder scrambling. From the summit our view extended into the heart of the Yosemite high country. The lofty peaks of Conness, Dana, Lyell, and Maclure were all clearly visible, each of them with its north-side glacier. Our view to the north included the peaceful-looking Bridgeport Valley and the Twin Lakes area. Directly at our feet, the sheer northeast face of the Matterhorn fell away. Nestling at the base of this precipice was the Matterhorn Glacier, one of the four glaciers which lie along the north side of the Sawtooth Ridge. These are the most northerly in the Sierra Nevada. We were impressed with the unusual aspect of the view from the Matterhorn, which results from its position so far to the north.

Many well-known Yosemite summits were in sight, all of them lined up like sentinels along the southern horizon.

After three days of intensely enjoyable and fascinating experiences, it was time for us to push on. With reluctance we left our timberline camp among the mountain hemlocks. It had been one of the best campsites that any of us could remember, and certainly had served us well. We regretted going from the valley of upper Slide Canyon and the Sawtooth Ridge. Although the features of the ridge were sharp and forbidding, they possessed at the same time a charm which is rare for such rugged country. We all agreed that, as soon as possible, we would return for another visit to Yosemite's Matterhorn country.



A portion of the Sawtooth Ridge.

Anderson



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*Climbers on the ice cone of Upper Yosemite Fall
—Ralph dePfyffer*

